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THE KLEPHTS IN MODERN GREEK POETRY

An Inquiry into a Graeco-Turkish Cultural Conflict

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Comparative Religion

By
GABRIEL ROMBOTIS

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THE KLEPHTS IN MODERN GREEK POETRY[1]

AN INQUIRY INTO A GRAECO-TURKISH CULTURAL CONFLICT

BY GABRIEL ROMBOTIS

ONE phase of the history of Greece during the Ottoman dominion much misunderstood by historians and critics is the life and work of the Greek groups known as Klephts.

Historically speaking, the Klephts were a minority of armed Greeks who broke away from the Ottoman authority, and retired to the mountains in order to maintain their independence. They were not ordinary "highway bandits" or "brigands" but organized groups with their own code of ethics and regulations.

The opinions and judgments concerning the Klephts and their poetry vary according to the more or less adequate information or the personal preconceptions and prejudices of the authors. From Adamantios Coraes, Dodwell, John Comstock to the ethnocentric Greek historians of the end of the nineteenth century, to the writers of the Cambridge Modern History (X,173); from the German or French historians, or R. W. Seton-Watson, Finlay and F. Tozer to the precursor of the Greek Revolution of 1821, Rhigas Pherraios, and some of the contemporary Greek historians, the reactions toward the Klephts have varied from uncritical appreciation to extreme hostility.

The writer undertook the study of the character and work of the Klephts, as impartially and objectively as possible, in order to discover what was their quest for the good life, how they answered this quest, if they did, and how religion helped them toward the realization of their life-ideal. The problem seemed to be neither theological nor apologetic, but *religious*—as these people understood their own religion and their attitude toward the rival religion of Islam; also *ethical*, the term used etymologically, that is directed by the consciousness of these individuals and groups according to their *mores* and customs.

Information was taken from available sources, histories, memoirs, biographies, and particularly from the popular Klephtic songs. These sources have sufficiently passed through the higher and lower

[1]This is the synopsis of the essential parts of a dissertation in candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Division of the Humanities, Department of Comparative Religion, the University of Chicago, June, 1932.

criticism of competent European and Greek scholars of whom the names of Campuroglou, Candeloros, and Politis are outstanding.

The Klephts were an immediate outcome of the Ottoman conquest of Greece, where Islam came as an antagonist to Christianity. During the entire period of bondage of the Greek land until its independence in 1821, the Klephts stood against the tyranny of the ruler. To his arbitrariness they responded by violence; to his despotism, by insolence and defiance. To Islamic fanaticism and aloofness they opposed their own religion preserved by the Millet system. If the Ottoman Government had been true to the highest ideals of Islam, the Klephts, in all probability, would never have appeared. As an internal, intractable group of the Ottoman Dominion, the Klephts may, to a great extent, be considered as forerunners of the contemporary internal revolution in the Ottoman Empire. To understand the Klepht-situation is to understand most of the reasons and factors that caused the actual overthrowing of the bases of the old Ottoman political régime and culture by pioneer, progressive, Turkish leaders.

With the political and cultural conflict resulting from the Ottoman conquest of Greece, the Greek people, who were not completely assimilated by adherence to Islam, accommodated themselves to the best of their ability by a complete abandonment of self-responsibility in government affairs, and by taking refuge in the spontaneous forms of social integration within the Greek communities, namely the folk-memories, traditions, myths, political and religious beliefs, dogmas and creeds, ceremonies, the mores and customs of the community, which through public opinion were crystallized in the folkways.

However, among the masses of the Greek people there were some who openly refused to submit to the new political régime, and decided to defend themselves by their strength. Retiring to the mountains they maintained a warlike policy of systematic plunder, killing, kidnaping, often waging a many-day combat against the oppressor. They were known as Klephts.

The origin of the Klephts was, in all probability, from the Greek groups who, in the fifteenth century, joined those military bodies in Europe known as *stradioti*. The name stradioti derived from *strada*, meaning road; it was given to them because they were always on foot and had no permanent residence. The Greek stradioti were mainly under the patronage of Venice. After the loss of

her Greek possessions, Venice could not extend her political protection to them. On the other hand the adventurous life in Europe in the Middle Ages did not present a real interest to the Greek stradioti. Their groups were dispersed leaving to Modern Greek language the word *stratiotes* which now means 'soldier.' It was after the dispersion from Europe of the Greek stradioti that the wildest mountains of Greece were filled with....the Klephts.

There is no historical record as to the exact date when the designation "Klepht" was applied to these people; nor when they were organized. Apparently the word was used by the Ottomans as a term of contempt, because in Greek it was synonymous with the term robber. There exist, however, official records of appointments of leading Klephts as *Armatoles* in the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566). An Armatole was a chief of an authorized police body, copied by the Ottoman on the pattern of the Byzantine militia of the *Akritai* or guardians of the frontier in the tenth century. However, in the twelfth century the word used by Venice for similar bodies of *armed* men posted on the mountain passes and other places was *Armati.* The name "Armatole" is the Grecized word "Armati." What should be remembered is that whether as Klephts or as Armatoles these men formed a distinct class quite different from the non-Moslems or rayahs. The Armatole was paid by the Government and was granted certain privileges. The organization of the Armatoles was fundamentally the same as that of the Klephts. When the Government dissatisfied the Armatole, he returned to his previous status as a Klepht. People had a special name for the Armatole: He was a "tamed Klepht"; and when he ceased to be an Armatole he was designated a "wild Klepht." Thus as time went on the Officio of the Armatole and that of the Klepht became interchangeable in the mind of the people.

The tenacious and audacious attitude of the Klephts toward the Ottoman Government gradually attracted the admiration of some talented members of the Greek people out of whom the popular poets grew. As the Klephts were the result of the political régime in Greece, the Klephtic Poet was the outcome of the Klephtic situation. The authors of these songs were indifferent to honors of authorship. Thus by absorbing and assimilating from the individualities of their successive makers who brought casual changes in various verses, these songs became automatically *impersonal* and were considered as the "common property" of the Greek Com-

munity. Scholarly collectors such as Fauriel, Passow, Politis and others published these poems later in book form which are now the sources of the popular poetical Muse of Greece.

These songs, through successive generations, were gradually incorporated with the mores, customs, and traditions of the different communities thus crystallizing themselves in the folk memory. The tremendous appeal of these poems to the Greek people, their numerical supremacy over all other popular Greek songs, can be explained primarily by the fact that they answered the actual secret wishes of the folk. These poems were for oppressed people a psychic means of achieving the notion of power. The weak was no longer so ashamed of himself: at least now he could sing these songs, or hear others sing them. His thought and feeling, disintegrated as they were through fear, became for a moment harmonized through the refreshing imagery of constructive thought equal to his understanding, and corresponding to tangible realities with which he was acquainted in his everyday existence. His life then appeared to him more worthy of living. He could carry on more easily.

The Component Elements of the Klephts' Character and Personality

One of the most important factors that entered into the composition of the Klephts' personality was the mountains, especially those where they had their strategic residences or *lemeria*. The most famous of these lemeria were in Thessaly, in Valto, Acarnania, in Maina and Morea, in Peloponnesus, in Souli, in Epirus. Many Klephtic songs reveal the effect of these mountains upon the attitudes of the Klephts.

Farewell high mountains and you fields full of roses;
Morning dew, nights full of moonlight, farewell.
Farewell you too, dear Sons of Klephts,
Who are so courageous that war cannot frighten you,
But you fall to it like lions.

Olympus and Kissavos

Olympus and Kissavos, these two mountains quarrel:
Olympus then turns toward Kissavos and says:
"Do not quarrel with me, O Kissavos, you Turk-trodden!
I am Old Olympus, so renowned o'er the world.
I have forty-two summits, sixty-two fountains.
On each fountain a banner, a Klepht on each tree-branch;
And on my highest peak an eagle is sitting."

The Klephtic life was really difficult. Nevertheless the Klepht's love for independence made him persevere. The following two poems depict the motives of the Klepht as well as the harshness of his occupation.

Vassili

"Vassili, be wise, be a landlord, get sheep, and oxen, and cows,
Fields and vines, and boys for your service."
"Mother, I don't want to be a landlord,
To get vines, and boys to serve me,
While I myself am a slave to the Turks,
A servant to the Elders.—Fetch me the light sword
And the heavy gun, that I may fly like a bird, high on the mountain-peaks;
Go along the mountains, walk through the woods, discover the *lemeria* of the Klephts,
Their Chieftains' retreat; whistle like a Klepht, join the comrades
Who war against Turkey and the Albanians."
In the morning he kisses his mother, in the morning he starts.
"Greeting to you mountains with your precipices, gorges covered with fog!"
"Be welcome, worthy fellow, valorous Pallikar."

The Life of the Klepht

Fellows, if you want youthful vigor, if you wish to be a Klepht,
Ask me and I'll tell you about the Klepht troubles and torments.
—Hard is the life we live, we poor Klephts!
Never change we our clothes, never wear white garments;
We are all day at war, the night on guard.
I have been Captain of Klephts for twelve years.
I never ate warm bread, never slept on a mattress;
I never even had enough sleep, never enjoyed the sweetness of sleep;
But I used, for a pillow, my hand; my sabre, for a mattress;
And as a sweetheart my arms embraced my dear gun.

The inequality of the Klephts' struggle against their adversary, numerically so superior, induced the Klephts to develop their physical strength as well as their sense perception to an almost incredible degree. Their ability in shooting, running, yelling with a formidable voice, using their sabres supremely well, equaled their capacity of resistance to hunger, thirst, and sleep. Their limited number made them extremely careful: they became acquainted with every path and precipice which they used either for attack or for escape. Vigilence, perseverence, sobriety were essential. In one of

many poems that describe these qualities of the Klephts, Captain Totskas is assumed to speak as follows:

"My boys, if you want a youthful vigor and a life of freedom
Make your hearts hard as steel, give your feet the resistance of iron.
Never drink wine, love not sleep:
Sleep is dangerous as death, and wine leads astray."

As time went on the need of organization was more definitely felt and established. This organization was simple and essentially aristocratic in character: Only the bravest or the wisest could become chieftains. The men who composed the company were ranked in four classes according to valor. They were called *pallikars,* a word derived from *Pallax,* meaning youth, brave, noble. Their number varied from thirty to one hundred, very seldom more. This strictly aristocratic organization was deeply democratic in mores: The strong ought to be also the righteous. The chief who transgressed this unwritten law of the group, generally, paid with his life.

Solidarity and mutual assistance were parts of the internal discipline of the Klephtic groups. This spirit continued after death also: It was an unspeakable ignonimy for a dead Klepht to have his head taken by the Turks. So it became a custom among Klephts to save at any price the body of the slain companion; and if impossible, to cut and take his head with them.

It would be an error to think that the special hatred of the Klephts against the Turks and their associates made them lose their sense of humor. When hate is the outcome of a social conflict of the nature of our study, and possesses a purposeful activity deeply felt by the subject, such a hate becomes a social force par excellence. For the Klephts life became a sport and variation of vissicitudes, a definite expectation. When not at work, the Klephts recuperated their forces with plays and games of their own. They also participated in the festivities and religious ceremonies of their communities, often defying the Turkish authorities with their presence. It is a historical fact, for example, that the famous Klepht Zacharias Barbitsiotis, in the festival of Vresthena used to dance and sing his favorite quatrain:

I swore on my sabre
And on my amulet
To hunt down a Turk
And deliver a Greek.

On such occasions their external personal appearance was very impressive: They girt their gold and silver embroidered shawls or *posia* around their heads, and their white kilt or *foustanella* around their waist; they put on their ornamental guns and weapons, adjusted their vests and their *tsapratzia* or small shields protecting the knees and the hip. In the following poem the poet picturesquely described the celebrated Klephts, Colocotronis, when they appeared in public festivals.

As snow glistens on mountains and the Sun lights the gorges
So are glittering the sabres of the Colocotronis.
They are covered with silver, silver their swords.
Five ranks of buttons on their vests, and six on their *tsapratzia.*
They do not deign to step on the ground:
Their bread they eat mounted just as they fight;
Mounted they take the *"holy bread"* from the hand of the priest.
Sequins is their offering to the Virgin and to the Saints.
But to Lord Jesus they present their silver sabre:
"O Christ, bless our sabre as well as our hands."

The home-ideal of the Klephts was admirable. Blood relationship, a large family were the bases of this ideal. This attitude cultivated a deep respect for women as demanded by the customs and mores of the Greek communities. Even when, for the sake of ransom, beautiful maidens (ordinarily from the class of priests or primates) were kidnaped, they were scrupulously respected by the kidnapers.

On account of the achievements of their chiefs, the Klephts' families were very proud of their lineage. And "family pride" contributed to the maintenance of family traditions of courage and tenacity of purpose. This was equally true of men and of women. Also their vigorous *esprit de corps* among members of the family developed individual habits of devotion and affection toward one another. In this respect the Greek family bonds proved superior to those of the Roman family where reciprocity of sentiments between its members was hindered by the very formalism and rigidity of the organization.

As hospitality has been an outstanding feature of the Greek social code, the Klephts were received everywhere it was possible by friends and relatives. However, by means of "koumparoship" (the nearest English equivalent of which would be "best man" and "god-father") the Klepht secured hospitality for himself more eas-

ANDRITSOS OR ANDROUTSOS VEROUSSOS

This famous Klepht from Livadia died in prison toward the end of the eighteenth century, betrayed and delivered by Venice to the Sublime Porte. This portrait, now in the National Museum of Athens, is the only original portrait of a Klepht, dated from his time, which has come down to us.

ily: Koumparoship was considered a "spiritual relationship." The element of socialization resulting from that relationship can hardly be overestimated, because the wandering Klephts made connections in different communities, which other Greeks could not make on account of lack of a system of communication between villages.

The dominant figures of the Klephtic groups were the Captains. Each group was known by the Captain's name. Determination, definiteness of purpose, supreme ability in the indispensable requirements of the profession, generosity when needed, gallantry, tenacity and inflexibility of character in the face of any event even death, fairness to his fellow-Klephts, power of persuasion—such were the predominant qualities of the leader. Nevertheless rivalries among chieftains often gave opportunity to Pashas to attract them to their Palaces and treacherously to put them to death.

The following song describes such policies:

Katsoudas

"Passer-by, do you know what happened to the Sons of Katsoudas?
They no longer appear either at Patras or at Saint-Sosti:
O that proud Floros; that terrible Katsoudas,
Who set up his standard both in the vale and on the mountain-peaks;
Whose running was the eagle's flight, whose walk was the running of hares."
—"Katsoudas went to Yiannina, went to give allegiance to Ali Pasha."

"Long live my Lord."—"Be welcome Katsoudas.
Katsoudas sit down, eat, drink and come afterward, I have a question for you."
—"I was given breakfast at the house of Divitsi."
—"Katsoudas taste the sweets, have your drink."
—"My Lord, I am getting dizzy from all this eating and drinking."
—"Much news has come to me from all the Vilaets, (districts)
From Agrapha, Patras, Valto and Carpenisi:
Katsoudas, I was told that you burnt villages and made many slaves."
—"You're told the truth, Affendi, and now I come to submit.
I now earned a thousand sequins, and am willing to give them to you.
And if you want the worthy Katsoudas as your help,

Let us chase away the Armatoles of Valto, and the Contoyianni."
When Ali Pasha heard this, his executioner he called in.
And while the Klepht bowed, off went his head.

Another noteworthy fact regarding the Klephtic leader was his contact with other lands than Greece. Famous chieftains, like Androutsos Veroussos, Zacharias Barbitsiotis, the Colocotronis, and others communicated with England, France, Venice, Russia, the Ionian Islands; and always they participated in the various attempts for revolution against the Ottomans, under the auspices of Russia and other European powers.

An attitude common to all Klephts was their loyalty to the Church. Under the actual circumstances of foreign domination the Church became the highest symbol of the Greek ethnic and religious aspirations. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, as historical records show, the Klephts began to manifest their claims by mottoes on their flags and by the style of their letters. They posed as "protectors of the Christians" and later, as "the defenders of the Cross, of the Christian faith, of the Church and of the honor of women." Among their ranks clergymen were found taking the lead "in the name of the country and of the faith."

Nevertheless the Klephts' loyalty to the Church did not prevent them from being hostile to certain priests and prelates whom, wrongly or rightly, they considered as political agents. This conduct, however, did not diminish the piety of the Klephts: their respect toward the churches with all objects of cult, even silver and gold was scrupulously maintained. They also participated in religious sacraments and ceremonies. Their religious recollections were vivid. They liked worship. And at Christmas or Easter time, when alone on the mountains, they celebrated singing whatever hymns they could remember.

Pari passu with their loyalty to the Church went their belief in the ethnic and religious traditions especially those connected with the Fall of Constantinople and the transformation of Saint-Sophia into a Mosque. The popular Poet expressed his impressions of these happenings in the following verses.

The Fall of Constantinople (1453)

They have taken the City, they have taken it; they have taken Salonica.
They also have taken Saint-Sophia, the Great Monastery,

Which has three hundred *symandra* and sixty-two large bells.
And for each bell, a priest; and for each priest, a deacon.
Just at the moment when the Sacrament,
When the King of the world came out (from the sanctuary)
A voice from Heaven came down from the mouths of angels:
"Leave off your psalmody, set down, on the altar, the Most Holy:
And send a message to the land of the Franks
In order that they may come and take it;
That they may take the golden cross, and the holy gospel;
And the holy table, so the Turks may not soil it."
When the Lady (Virgin Mary) heard that, her icons began to cry.
"Calm thyself, O Lady, do not shed tears, do not weep.
"With years, with time, (all these things) once more will be thine."

Around these two fundamental events history was reconstructed in the mind of the Greek folk. Easily accepted legends led them to expect the dead Emperor of Byzantium, Constantine Paleologue XI, who "was transformed into marble" and hidden under the earth by an angel, to rise from the dead and assume leadership and chase the Turk out of Constantinople. Conjointly it was believed that the priest, who, at the fall of Constantinople, was celebrating Mass in Saint-Sophia and miraculously disappeared inside the wall of the altar when a Janissary attempted to kill him, would reappear to complete "the unfinished Mass."

As time went on without the realization of the Greek people's hopes, more traditions and legends were successively created afresh to support their expectations: "Signs" were perceived, mysterious psalmodies at Easter time were heard around Saint-Sophia, by specially gifted individuals. However, a little apocalyptic book called "Agathangelos," written in Greek by a homonymous Greek monk of the thirteenth century, translated into Italian, and retranslated into Greek in the eighteenth century, became as helpful in sustaining hopes among the Greek folk as it has been fateful and disastrous in the misinterpretations of "the coming hour." The Klephts were victims of these misinterpretations and often were exploited by political impostors who took advantage of their credulity.

With reference to the solution of problems beyond their control, the Klephts had adopted a few techniques of the Greek communities. They seriously believed in the secret power of amulets, oracles and auspices; but *scapulimancy,* or the so-called ability of

predicting future events as revealed from signs on the shoulder-blades of sheep, was even more authoritative among the Klephts.

Another way of protection and security the Klephts found in the propitiation of supernatural beings; and the offerings and sacrifices of the Klephts were proportional to the good they expected from the Saints they invoked. Their prayers were petitions dictated by the spirit of *do ut des*, logically a part of their way of religious feeling and reasoning. Thus Theodore Colocotronis prayed to the Virgin Mary in 1803: "Help us to free our country from the tyrant, and I will rebuild thy church (whose roof was wrecked) as it was before." This prayer was heard in 1822, so the petitioner tells us in his *Memoirs*, and he then kept his promise and rebuilt the church. However, the outstanding feature in the religious life of the Klephts was their firm belief and trust in God and immortality. God was for the Klephts the highest, unquestioned guarantee of trustworthiness and loyalty. This fact differentiated the Klephts, as a whole, from the other Greek folk whose religious practices dealt more frequently with Saints and Intercessors. This attitude of the Klephts was, very probably, due to the nature of their occupation: The Klephts could trust nobody completely. And psychologically speaking, *trust* was what the Klephts needed most. Thus, for them God was *someone* supreme, in whom they could *believe* without any bargaining or reservation of mind. There is no example known of a "faithless," "atheistic" Klepht.

Such, in the main, were the character and personality of the Klephts until their decimation in 1806 by the combined persecution of the Sultan and the Patriarch Callinicos V who used his terrible power of excommunication causing such a fright and consternation among the Greek people, that they refused to help the persecuted Klephts. Deprived of everything and starving, those who survived the catastrophe crossed over to the Ionian Islands. There, new contacts, as well as the growing spirit of nationalism from the French Revolution caused a permutation in their social personality. When the Greek Revolution started in 1821 many of the old chieftains, such as Marco Botsaris, Karaiskakis, Colocotronis, Niketaras, became generals and contributed greatly to important victories of the Greek armies.

Thus, at the beginning of their career, with a narrow scope aiming at self-independence, the Klepht continued his occupation imitating the Ottoman policies and applying them to the rulers. Simil-

THEODORE COLOCOTRONIS, 1770-1843
Klepht and Warrior

itude of motives, tendencies and means brought some fellow-Klephts together: Organization began. Numerically this organization was very limited. In order to counter-balance, as much as possible, the enormity of their adversary, the Klephts had to increase their own forces *qualitatively*: They succeeded supremely well. For all things they could do, or thought they could do, they relied upon themselves. Without any formal education, generally speaking, with a world-view basically the same as that of the Greek folk, the Klephts defined for themselves the meaning of good and evil according to their professional group-conscience and also to the essentials of the social code of the Greek community. Thus the ideal of the good-life of the Klephts gradually fixed itself. Its program in-

cluded a finished manhood as exacted by the needs of their occupation; a sworn hatred against the ruler and his associates; a loyal defense of the rights of religion and of the community; will to power and self-assertiveness even unto death.

From the point of view of the realization of their own unique capacities in order to fulfill the demands of their occupation, the Klephts accomplished their purpose fully: They were *good* in the Aristotelian sense. As to those things beyond their control the Klephts, following the spirit of the social environment in which they were born and grew, turned either to their religion or to magical and primitive devices in order to seek protection or anticipate future events.

The Rôle of the Klepht in the Cultural Conflict

What was the rôle, in general, that the Klepht played in this Graeco-Turkish cultural conflict?

As we look retrospectively into the nature and the results of this conflict, it is obvious that the rôle of the Klepht was social, political, moral, military, and religious.

With no formal education and with only his physical strength, his common sense, and long practical experience, the Klepht stood, as a vigilant Greek Nemesis between the strongly antagonistic Greek and Ottoman cultures. He prevented their fusion as much as possible. His haughty refusal to adhere to Islam, his proud scorn of death kept the morale of the Christians high. His duplicity with the Pashas and their auxiliaries made him penetrate more deeply into the technique and secrets of the Ottoman Government and he became a "diplomat" at its expense. His opposition to Greek Magistrates, associates of the Turk, could not help but bring to light, and restrain, their injustices.

By living the Klephtic life for so many generations, the Klepht thoroughly learned the topography of Greece and made acquaintances everywhere in a time when communication of inhabitants of different Greek villages was impracticable. Moreover, his knowledge of the Greek territory proved invaluable when he helped in the rapid spread of the Revolution for Independence in 1821, throughout the country.

With his perseverence, tenacity of purpose, and indomitable ambition the Klepht became a special expert who provided the Revolu-

tion with exceedingly capable generals, such, for example, as Theodore Colocotronis and George Karaiskakis.

During all the time of his struggle, the Klepht saved the moral dignity of the Greek people and served as a vigorous stimulation to their courage, which often began to fail under the pressure of a tyrannical régime. One important result of this invigoration was the birth and growth of the popular Klephtic Poet.

The Klepht differentiated between the functions of a politician and those of the clergy, and disapproved of the intervention of the Church in politics. This attitude often made him accuse members of the clergy of acting as political agents. As to his religion, despite his naïve credulity in many matters, and his use of magical devices and techniques, the Klepht remained freer and stronger in his religious sentiments and behavior than the masses of the folk of the Greek community.